

**Bill title:** Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act

**Bill number:** [H.R. 556](#)

**Date introduced:** January 15, 2009

**Status:** Referred to the House Natural Resources; Subcommittee hearing held May 5, 2009; voted on by House on July 28, 2009, and passed by a vote of 316-107. The language was introduced in the Senate by Sen. Barbara Boxer as [S. 1748](#).

**Summary:** Sea Otters help keep the nearshore marine ecosystem healthy and balanced by feeding on sea urchins and other kelp grazers, thereby allowing kelp forests to flourish. Sea otters are also a major draw for the tourism industry, inject millions of dollars into California's Central Coast economy.

Once numbering in the tens of thousands in California but hunted to near total extinction at the start of the 20th century, the Southern Sea Otter population has been slowly recovering for the last half century. But their numbers are threateningly low: based on the U.S. Geological Survey's three year running average, less than 3,000 animals remain. What is worse, the gradual growth of their population may have slowed or stopped altogether, because mortality rates have peaked in recent years.

H.R. 556 will aid the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's current recovery efforts for Southern Sea Otters by creating a team of sea otter-experts to review scientific proposals to study recent trends in the sea otters' population, as well as providing funding for such studies.

The bill sets forth the following essential steps to achieving a healthy and robust population of southern sea otters:

- Directs the Secretary of the Interior to undertake a research and recovery program for southern sea otters.
- Creates a competitive grant program to support sea otter research and recovery efforts.
- Establish a Southern Sea Otter Scientific Advisory Committee to recommend research and recovery priorities.
- Provides an authorization of five million dollars per year for five years to implement this program.

In May, the bill had a very successful hearing before the House Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife and received highly favorable testimony from scientists and conservationists. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service clearly stated that the legislation is warranted given the dire situation for sea otters in California. The bill was voted on by the full House in July and passed. It was introduced in the Senate in September.